

A Crunchy Conundrum: Can Ashkenazim Eat Soft Sephardic Matzah?

*Based on a shiur given by Rabbi Lebowitz,
adapted by Rabbi Jordan Auerbach.*

Identify, to the surprise of some, actually plays a significant role in halacha. Whether examining familial or geographic identity, custom and the halachic practices of an individual are significantly formed and dictated by the individual's identity.

When Rabbi Maurice Lamm z"l davened at my shul, he approached me with some distress about his health situation. At that time, he was not well and was having difficulty with digestion and knew that he would be unable to eat the requisite *shiur* of standard matzah at the Seder. He wanted to know if I had any *eitzah* of what he could do to fulfill the mitzvah given the circumstances.

As Ashkenazim know, matzah is not necessarily the easiest food to eat in large quantities, let alone digest. Yet each year we sit around the Seder table and in our noble attempt to fulfill the mitzvah of *achilas matzah* in the most ideal way, we race to finish a *k'zayis* of the crunchy stuff. However, another form of matzah exists. There are

Sephardic communities which indulge in a soft, laffa-like, matzah that is much easier on the jaw as well as the stomach.

I suggested to Rabbi Lamm that perhaps he could eat the Sephardic soft matzos in lieu of the traditional Ashkenazic ones he had always eaten on Pesach. To say that Rabbi Lamm was initially uncomfortable with this suggestion would be an understatement. Years of observing the mitzvah in accordance with the Ashkenazic custom and halachic rulings had clearly formed a strong sense of Ashkenazic identity, particularly with regard to the *hanhagos* of Pesach, which was being challenged by my solution to this problem. While the idea of eating a different type of matzah on Pesach may certainly be jarring to many, there is certainly significant material in the sources to evaluate whether my suggestion was halachically sound.

In evaluating my proposal, the first question one must ask is whether an Ashkenazic Jew can eat the soft Sephardic matzos in the first place. When an Ashkenazi Jew, and for that matter many communities of Sephardic Jews, see what the soft Sephardic



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matzos look like their initial reaction would probably be along the lines of "that's not matzah that's like a laffa or pita bread, that's chametz!"

Let us look to the sources to clarify the issue and determine whether one can eat the matzos of other traditions within Klal Yisrael.

In *Maseches Pesachim* (36b-37), there is a debate that begins to shape our analysis of the question at hand. Beis Shamai, in the *beraisa*, state that it is prohibited to make thick breads (matzos) on Pesach while Beis Hillel rule that baking these thick breads

(matzos) is permitted. Rashi explains that Beis Shamai prohibit the baking of thick breads because it will be nearly impossible to prevent the leavening of the bread when the dough is kept at such a thickness. There is a lengthy discussion regarding the exact thickness these breads can reach within the opinions of Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel. The Gemara quotes Rav Huna who rules (according to Beis Hillel, see Rashi) that the thickness threshold for thick bread would be one *tefach* thick. This is a pretty significant thickness (approx. 3.5 inches) and this measurement is derived from the *lechem hapanim* which was present on the Shulchan in the Beis Hamikdash and could not be chametz. Rav Yosef disagrees and rules that the measurement for matzah cannot be derived from the *lechem hapanim* since the *kohanim* were charged with its preparation and would be extra careful to ensure that there would be no leavening taking place and therefore the maximum thickness is not a *tefach* and is instead some measurement less than a *tefach*. The implication is that even this stricter approach is still much thicker than our average Ashkenazic matzos.

The *Ohr Zarua* quotes the Ra'avya in *Pesachim* (Siman 470) who rules that we follow Rav Yosef that the matzah must be less than a *tefach* thick but up to a *tefach* is acceptable. Over the years, matzos became thinner and thinner until our crunchy variety became the norm in Ashkenazic and some Sephardic communities. This evolution probably stems from the halachic sources which highlight the risk of baking thicker matzos with the possibility of leavening occurring. Since there is an obligation to proactively guard against leaving, we have adopted the practice of baking thinner matzos to significantly reduce the risk of

the dough leavening and becoming chametz.

The *Shulchan Aruch* rules in accordance with the *Ohr Zarua*, *ein osin b'Pesach pas avah tefach* (OC 460:5) that we may not bake matzos that are a *tefach* thick. Interestingly, The Rema does not comment on the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch* regarding the thickness of matzah. The *Mishna Berura* does provide some context and explanation for this ruling and explains the associated risks with baking matzos close to a *tefach* in thickness and cautions us to be careful with matzos that are close to the maximum thickness, recommending that we should bake them thinner.

But how much thinner? Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z'l (*Halichos Shlomo*, Seder Leil Pesach: Matzah p. 281) writes that the Ashkenazic minhag is to make matzos as thin as possible and an Ashkenazic person should not be lenient to eat thicker than our typical matzos. Rav Shlomo Zalman does provide various options for someone who has a hard time eating or digesting Ashkenazic matzah.

However, it's not so clear that the extra thin, crunchy matzos which we know have been the customary option for so long. Moreinu HaRav Schachter quotes that when the *Mishna Berura* (OC 486:3) discusses the size of a *k'zayis*, the *Mishna Berura* writes that if there is an air pocket in the matzah, the pocket should be popped to ensure that the matzah is measured properly. This is because the air does not count towards the *shiur k'zayis*. In that context, the *Mishna Berura* writes that someone who is using soft spongy matzah can measure it without having to compress it, as long as there are no air pockets.

Rav Schachter writes in a teshuva (Dated Purim Kattan 5771) that

according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, the beracha on a hard cracker is *mezonos* unless someone makes a meal (*koveiah seuda*) out of crackers. Sephardim generally make a *mezonos* on crackers and hard (Ashkenazic) matzah certainly seems to be cracker-like. So what do Sephardim do at the Seder? Can they eat Ashkenazi matzah or do they specifically have to eat Sephardi matzah? The acharonim suggest that since the Seder is in the context of a meal (*koveiah seuda*), the beracha on Ashkenazi matzah is *hamotzi*, even for Sephardim.

What about the reverse? Can an Ashkenazi use Sephardic matzah? Rav Schachter notes that when the Rema (460:4) writes that matzah should be made *rekikin* "thin", he does not mean they need to be hard like crackers, but rather that they should be thinner than a *tefach* or even better, should be thinner than a finger's breadth. The Sephardic matzos are certainly thinner than a finger's breadth. Regarding the Rema and Ashkenazi tradition, Rav Schachter writes that we don't have a binding minhag to eat the cracker-like matzos. It is simply a common practice but not one that has acquired a halachically binding status.

It seems clear from the poskim that it is permissible for Ashkenazim to eat the soft matzos of the Sephardim. Although we generally feel a strong sense of identity linked to our family's lineage, which dictates our halachic practice, there are times when it may be necessary to follow the custom of another branch of the family that is Klal Yisrael.